What do you see? A phenomenological contribution to Mitchell's picture theory: Fiedler, Husserl, Imdahl

In der bildenden Kunst handelt es sich weder um Inhalt noch um Form, sondern um Bildmäßigkeit, um Phänomenalität. Robert Vischer, *Der Ästhetische Akt und die reine Form* (1874)

On peut bien affirmer que tout est dicible, c'est vrai, mais ce qui ne l'est pas, c'est que la signification du discours recueille tout le sens du dicible. On peut dire que l'arbre est vert, mais on n'aura pas mis la couleur dans la phrase. Jean-François Lyotard, *Discours, Figure* (1971)

Few models of image analysis have been so influential during the last decades as that provided by the pictorial turn. The current article is a contribution to this paradigm that is associated to the work of William John Thomas Mitchell. At least three books from his extensive bibliography are the pillars on which the picture theory stands. Simplifying to the extreme, *Iconology* (1986) marked a clear shift from the linguistic to the pictorial turn and focused on the specificity of images as a means of representation. *Picture Theory* (1994) drew a further link between pictures and cultural politics. *What Do Pictures Want* (2005) approached visual culture through a broad range of techniques and practices that justify visuality, from technical imagery to epistemological enquiries into vision based on anthropological and physiological positions.

Nevertheless, one wonders why these studies that cover a wide horizon of methodological approaches - ranging from Panofsky's iconology to Goodman's theory of symbols - avoid the *phenomenological* theory of visuality and image-consciousness. We refer here to at least three moments that are important for picture theory: the pre-phenomenological theory of Konrad Fiedler, Husserl's phenomenology of image-consciousness and Imdahl's iconics (posited as an alternative to Panofsky's iconology). After all, if picture theory treats images as constitutive of our perception and interpretation of the world, how can it omit these fundamental insights into the specificity of visuality? Is it a case of a primal repression or simply of a different take on the conception of images? In *What Do Pictures Want?* especially, Mitchell insists that the object of visual studies is not just art history and aesthetics but a long list of all imaginable approaches to visuality,

ranging from technical imagery to philosophical and psychoanalytic investigations into the nature of vision, sociological and even phenomenological studies. (Mitchell 2005, 339) It seems that the shift from the linguistic to the pictorial left us with fewer than with more distinctions. Any paradigm that relates to visuality and imagery is assimilated as significant because visual culture does not only deal with images but also with quotidian and immediate ways of seeing. (Mitchell 2005, 343) Images are complex socio-cultural constructs that demand a literacy and a correlation to other senses and modes of interpretation.

Nevertheless, the homologation of visuality and imagery to other means of mediating meaning (like texts, charts, practices) entails the risk of ignoring a difference, namely that visuality and imagery refer to distinctive types of intuitions that correspond to different types of consciousness. On the other hand, the contribution of phenomenology to picture theory delineates a structural difference in these types of consciousness: intuiting a visual image is not the same as intuiting an equally visual object given in the flesh. One thus wonders whether Mitchell is right to argue that visual *culture* begins with the *perception* of the face of the other. (Mitchell 2005, 351) From a phenomenological perspective, perceiving a face present in the flesh differs from the perception of an image of that face. The referent is *readable* as identical but the type of consciousness pertaining to the two acts of *perception* is different. One could argue that visual *culture* begins with the awareness of a distinction in perceiving an image from the presence of its correlate.

Further, as Imdahl's iconic method will show, images constitute the objects it refers to by subordinating them to its own visual structure. As we shall see, this visual structure is not an object in the world but an immaterial appearance. In this sense, Mitchell reminds us that 'vision is itself invisible; that we cannot see what seeing is.' (Mitchell 2005, 337) However, this is not a paradox but a tension between modes of consciousness that operate differently when perceiving a hologram, an object present in the flesh, a phantasm or when reading a poem. Images are constructs that reach us differently from other objects and especially from the presence of a person.[1] Yet the picture theory turns a blind eye to the fact that the visual culture involves distinct modulations of consciousness. One can turn images into agencies that act on us, endow them with vitality and desire in order to ask what do they really want.

(Mitchell 2005, 11, 90) While projecting intentionality onto artefacts, this extrapolation forgets to describe the way in which consciousness intuits them *as* artefacts. Mitchell argues that 'what pictures want from us, what we have failed to give them, is an idea of visuality adequate to their ontology'. (Mitchell 2005, 47) Also, in *Iconology*, he rightly pointed out the necessity of accounting for the 'uniqueness of the graphic image'. (Mitchell 1986, 156)

However, this 'uniqueness' and this 'ontology' require a proper phenomenological description that distinguishes the intuition of the visual *before* relating it to other forms of representation.[2] A phenomenological description is required precisely in order to distinguish the forms of representation that images introduce within the visual culture. This is thus opposed to the mere homologation of images to other form of representation. Simply put, a phenomenology of images and their appertaining type of consciousness can precisely delineate *how* images *visually* mediate our perception of the world. Without making any ontological claims, the following sections provide the picture theory with a necessary phenomenological appendix that includes three episodes: Konrad Fiedler's theory of *pure visuality*, Husserl's description of the *image consciousness* and Max Imdahl's *iconic method.* These three episodes mark an evolution in the phenomenological model of image analysis. As it shall be shown, this model emphasises the *potentiality* of *visuality* as a means thorough which images provide the presentation of the world with a visual sense.

I. Pre-phenomenological method: Konrad Fiedler

An image says a thousand words: this adage sums up one part of the Western philosophy of art. Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder would crystallize another part. A third phrase would have to render the production of art. Regarding the perception and interpretation of images, a methodological distinction is required because, on the one hand, the bulk of the philosophical tradition approached images as *analogical* to other communicative processes. On the other hand, the phenomenological method focuses on the visual object that images reveal while distinguishing this object from its referent and describing its corresponding type of consciousness. Identifying a referent in an image or designating the lack thereof homologates the image to other systems of signs. Emphasising our relation to images is a necessity (Mitchell 2005, 49), yet this relation subordinates visuality to other means of communication. This

approach overlooks the specificity of the visual because it methodologically integrates it within a general economy of signs. That is, we look at images *in order to* identify, communicate or debate a subject.

This is the case even in theories that reject mimesis as a sufficient and necessary condition to explain how images make sense. Nelson Goodman's classic *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (1968, 1976) explained images by means of a general theory of symbols. So denotation is understood not as a specific function of images but as a generic mode of signification. Even though images are dense and undifferentiated symbols, for Goodman, they signify by conforming to a system of conventions. They are different from language yet they still abide to the *coding function* specific to all systems of signs.[3] The image is a visual sign (dense and irregular) whose actual meaning depends on knowledge of the codes it actualises.

The code that mediates the meaning of images can be broad. In *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (1981), Arthur Danto famously argued that an art historical style is a way of seeing that can be learned. Giotto's contemporaries spontaneously grasped the meaning of his works as windows to the presented holy scenes. If Giotto's way of seeing appears opaque to us, it is because we are not accustomed to it the way the 'artworld of his time' was. (Danto 1981, 163) The clarity of the argumentation reveals also its simplicity and its apparent common-sense. In Danto's view, the visuality that an artist produces requires the acceptance and the mediation of the artworld. The specialised public mediates the visuality of the artist and transforms it into a code that anyone can appropriate. Regardless of the problematic stance towards the pre-existence of a spectatorship for the artist's work, the epistemological claim is clear: images actualise the deep level structure of a shareable code.[4] Because they depend on a code that they actualise, the visuality of images is subordinated to their *communicative performativity*. And for the picture theory this performativity is relational because images are interpreted as in a constant interaction to the social context that they mediate.[5] However, this approach undervalues the *optical force* of images that is perceived as the mediator of information. What you see is what you the code allows you to see because the act of seeing is essentially an act of translation.

Now, the picture theory has had a subtle relation to this communicational function of images. Mitchell has time and again emphasised the visual value (or here is designated by 'optical force) of images. Recently, in *What Do Pictures Want?,* he argued that 'what pictures want is not the same as the message they communicate or the effect that they produce; it's not even the same as what they say they want. Like people, pictures may not know what they want; they have to be helped to recollect it through a dialogue with others.' (Mitchell 2005, 46) However, in order to underline this visual value one has to approach it through means that do not homologate it to other means of communication. Dialoguing about what images connote does not necessarily identify their potential *as* images.

In this context, Konrad Fiedler intimated in the middle of the 19th century an insight into the optical force of images that he extracted and explored as the pertinent criterion for a pre-phenomenological approach of images.[6] Fiedler's art theory merely anticipated the phenomenological method and questioned the communicative function of images. Images are conceived as creative acts that mediate, like science, an understanding of the world. In the language of Goodman, their function is to constitute the world and just not to mirror it. Yet in order to describe this function, images are approached according to a different method. If the iconographic content of images is bracketed, then the correlate of the intuition is a visual appearance. What you see when you suspend the content of an image is not the visibility *of* something but an autonomous visual entity that Fiedler called 'pure visuality' (*reine Sichtbarkeit*). This might seem an artificial way of perceiving an image because any viewer tries to identify an object in an image. Nevertheless, this identification has to be postponed in order to determine the specific way in which an image appears to the mind.

Lambert Wiesing has further expounded the notion of 'pure visuality' by distinguishing it from the notion of 'adherent visuality' (*anhängende Sichtbarkeit*).[7] On the one hand, 'adherent visuality' designates the fact that the visual is one amongst different attributes of an object that can be perceived through senses other than sight (like smelling or touching). On the other hand, the notion of 'pure visuality' abstracts the visual appearance of an object and transposes the other senses (especially touch) within the realm of the visible. Hence, in order to describe the

specificity of the visual realm one has to bracket the materiality and the content of an image. This act of bracketing might seem an abstraction from the perspective of the picture theory, yet it is here required as a methodological step. Because it considers the visual as always embedded in other systems of signs, the picture theory resists the idea of a visuality that is pure. (Mitchell 2008, 13) However, this purity neither excludes the relation of vision to other senses nor does it reject a visual literacy. Fiedler proposes a methodological shift that purifies the visual form in order to determine the specificity of the visual as a form of signification distinct and not adjacent to language. Emulating visuality to the 'ability to read' undermines – at least on a methodological level - the optical force that images have. The idea is not to extrapolate the functioning of other systems of signs into the realm of the visual in order to show how images signify. To the contrary, even when relating images to the entire 'panoply of figures' and discourses, the goal is to distinguish the functioning of images from other systems of signs. These other figures are significant for a picture theory as long as they resist – as a figural force, optical and plastic – their subordination to other system of signs. Or, if reading means following the regularity of a determinate code, the idea of 'reading' images is detrimental to their ontology and, as we shall see, to their phenomenological appeal.

The phenomenological approach to images starts thus with a difference between the perception of objects present in the flesh, the interpretation of signs and the perception of images. While *visibility* is one amongst other senses through which we perceive objects (adjacent to touching or smelling), *visuality* refers to an appearance that images display. What they show is an optical construct different from the material through which they appear and that exists for the eye alone. I see and touch a tree in a garden but the photograph or the painting of the same tree appears as an ensemble of lines and shades. This ensemble can be used as a sign for the tree yet, *as a visual appearance*, this communicative is secondary to the fact that it constitutes that tree as an optical manifestation.[8] Simply put, no one needs an image, let alone a history of art, in order to learn how trees look. Images present us with a visuality that is distinct from the quotidian visibility. In this sense, visual culture starts with the bracketing of visibility and the cultivation of visuality. In other words, visual culture begins when images are no longer treated according to the economy of signs but as visual appearances that resist their subordination to the system of signs.

Only in a second step this pure visuality gives a visual sense to the world that it signifies. If one looks through the colours and shades of a painting, then these chromatic elements have a strong impact onto the way that the viewer perceives the world. The painting is not just a sign of the world but it also mediates our visual perception of the world. In this sense, the visual culture 'invents' the landscape because we look at Dutch 19th century landscape painting in order to see *its* colours and not in order to treat the painting as a sign for the actual landscape. The position of formalism towards visual culture is founded on the bracketing of the communicative function of images. One has to describe how artistic images determine our perception of nature and not how images help us communicate about nature.

In *Über die Beurteilung von Werken der Bildenden Kunst* (1876), Fiedler rejects the conception of art as an imitation of nature. The image does not render an object (which is itself not a fixed entity) but it actually presents visual traces that are not in the referent. Lines, chromatic tones and perspectival arrangements constitute an optical appearance that is not necessarily part of the presented object. Fiedler explains the creative act as a modalisation of being, i.e. the image is a process of that constantly transforms a referent. He writes: 'The artist is called upon to create another world besides and above the real one, a world free from early conditions, a world in keeping with his own discretion. This realm of art opposes the realm of nature.' (in Karl Ashenbrenner, ed., 1965, 364). Images shape visibility (*Sichtbarkeitgestaltung*) and this is a process equally significant for what it leaves our as for what it presents. However, this optical structure - other than the material of the image and its content - is 'figural' (in the sense of Lyotard) because it both reveals and hides aspects of the presented object. The optical structure that the image presents has an optical force because it determines the way that the viewer perceives the object as a visual sign.

Fiedler intimated thus the development of the visual arts in modernity when he argued in *Über den Ursprung der künstlerischen Tätigkeit* (1887) that the development of the visual arts makes impossible any comparison between art and nature. Like Wilhelm von Humboldt, Fiedler conceives language and visual arts as constitutive of thinking: they both mediate our knowledge of the world.[9] Other than science that subordinates the world to concepts, visual arts mediate this world as a visual construction.

However, Fiedler also relates images and language but then from a different perspective than as means of communication. Both language and art are expressive movements (*Ausdruckbewegung*) that constitute the perceived reality. Fiedler uses the metaphor of a flower: the plant grows into a fruit that, like the artwork, is different from the plant itself.[10]

The autonomy of form is taken to the extreme as Fiedler repeats this line of thought in his reflections on architecture. In the *Bemerkungen über Wesen und Geschichte der Baukunst* (1878), Fiedler argues that architecture liberates form both from the material and from the practical constraints. Schopenhauer already argued for the primacy of form over matter in architecture, yet bracketing the purpose of a building is a controversial argument. Architecture becomes with Fiedler an exercise in the austerity of imagination that generates tectonic forms without symbolic or practical use.[11] This extrapolation of visuality in Fiedler's absolute formalism already announces the phenomenological model of the image. The image thematises what Rober Vischer called around the same time in the 19th century the 'phenomenality' of the world, a visual appearance that is distinct from the denoted referent.

II. The phenomenological method: Edmund Husserl

While Fiedler distinguished pure visuality as the pertinent object of image analysis, Husserl provided a precise description of its corresponding type of consciousness.[12] In distinction from the picture theory, the phenomenological method begins with a differentiation. On the one hand, the perception of an object presents (*gegenwärtigen*) a correlate that exists here and now (the table on which my arm rests). On the other hand, the object of a phantasy or memory is not here in the flesh but it is thought of as happening now (I can imagine a unicorn). Hence, other than the perception of a present object, a phantasy or an image presentify their objects (or renders them present, as the notion *vergegenwärtigen* is sometimes translated).

Nevertheless, the differences between these modalities of presentation are more significant than their similarities. Firstly, the phantasy lacks the character of reality because, when I intend centaurs, the correlate appears in a 'quasi' mode: it is as if it was present but it is not present like the table on which I write. The imagining consciousness also posits its correlate as absent: when I imagine a tree that I once

saw, I present something that is now absent. In phantasy, an image hovers before me while I am free to change its consistency and content. (Husserl 1980, 13) These distinctions are significant in order to understand that the image consciousness lies between perception and imagining. A picture shows a correlate that is not present (*gegenwärtig*) but rendered present or presentified (appearing as a *Vergegenwärtigung*). The intuition of a photograph of a tree is open to different objects: there is the material carrier (the photographic paper) and the immaterial semblance (the form and the colour of the displayed tree).

Now, this distinction is evoked in the picture theory, yet without any reference to Husserl's phenomenology. (Mitchell 2005, 85; Mitchell 2008, 16) More importantly, Mitchell focuses on the distinction between the carrier and the appearance but overlooks the modality of the consciousness pertaining to images. This is important because, as we shall see, the structure of the image consciousness explains the picture theory's communicational approach to images. For the moment, it is important to be aware that the phenomenological method dematerialises the image in order to designate the double correlate of its intuition: we perceive a picture (a material inscription) *and* an image (an immaterial appearance of shapes and colours, an optical appearance).[13] Hence, Husserl distinguishes between three constitutive components of an image: the material carrier, the image-object (*Bildobjekt*) and the image-subject (*Bildsujet*). The carrier is the paper or the canvass on which the image is materially inscribed. The image-object is the immaterial semblance that has a form or a chromatic appearance. The image-subject is the reference that the image-object designates.

What do you see when looking at an image from Husserl's perspective? Given a photograph of a tree, one does not apprehend either the tree (that is absent) or the medium (the photographic paper). What you see is an image-object or a semblance that does not exist like the real tree or the paper on which it is inscribed.[14] Properly speaking, an image is not a thing; literally speaking, an image is no-thing, an apparition or a semblance. The phantasy of a palace in Berlin is different from its photographic presentation. Other than an object present in the flesh or the phantasy of the same object, the image-object is an immaterial nothing (*ein Nichts*), a not-now in the now or a nullity exhibiting something absent. (Husserl 1980, 45)

Imagination allows the perceiver to see into the image a different temporal and spatial layer than what is actually present. Take as an example Roland Barthes' photograph of his mother: the picture renders present in the now a non-existent moment and a non-existent subject. The moment and the subject do not exist like the material picture that Barthes holds in his hands. The image-object has no material presence and merely renders something present that does not belong to this instant (of looking at the image). The imaginative apprehension aims at a different subject that resembles the person that existed in the flesh. The image only awakens the mental image that corresponds to it. (Husserl 1980, 22) In other words, the image-object is not a substance present in a place but an appearance that initiates a relation to something absent. The visual semblance (the image-object) prompts a relation to the mother (the image-subject).

If the presentation of an image is figurative, one can identify an image-subject into the image-object (like the banal recognition of a palace in a photograph). However, this does not exclude the possibility of associating this image-subject to other, latently present, subjects like social status or architectural styles. These are not the actual image-subjects but potential relations that the structure of the image allows. It is thus the dissociation of the image's constitutive layers and its dematerialisation indicates an internal relational structure that allows the viewer to correlate the image-object to different image-subjects. In this sense, this phenomenological description justifies the claim that 'what pictures want from us … is an idea of visuality adequate to their ontology'. (Mitchell 2005, 47) In other words, phenomenology provides the ontology of the image that the picture theory anticipates. However, this 'ontology' depends on the image-*consciousness* that entails a relational structure and points to its subject(s). The communicational bias of the picture theory *fundamentally* depends on the internal relational structure of the image consciousness. The image is a conflictual space because it is perceived as more than its medium and other than its subject.[15] If this conflict between physical medium and image-object vanishes, then the image-consciousness stops. The political power of images that the picture theory and the cultural studies cherish so much depends on an internal dissociation that consciousness can cultivate by associating the image-object to other subjects.

When fantasising, the image is identical to its content and both can change: in ordinary circumstances, the object of daydreaming and its alterations alter according to one's will. When viewing a picture, one intuits either the material carrier or the image-object. A Raphael painting can be perceived as a pierce of canvass or as an image-object in which a woman coloured in black and surrounded by cherubs is identified. However, the two correlates cannot be simultaneously intuited. (Husserl 1980, 44) Simply put, the viewer is either in the position of the restorer who intends the paint and the canvass *or* in the position of the art historian who intends the formal and symbolic values.[16] In section 16, Husserl argues that reproductions of paintings cannot be the subject of an aesthetic experience. They are merely indexes of the originals or 'repertories of memory'. Should we then put into perspective this phenomenological dematerialisation of images? If the aesthetic experience depends on the presence of the original, then it must also consider the material qualities. When it comes to the aesthetic experience of paintings, the idea of an immaterial image-object is a considerable tension.

Sartre too, emphasised this relation character of the image consciousness by arguing that it is an illusion to think that images are immanent to consciousness, as if they were dwelling in a place. To the contrary, the image is a relation through which consciousness renders present something absent. (Sartre 1940, 49) In perceiving an object that is present, one synthesises the multiple adumbrations (or shadings) of the present object. (Sartre 1940, 22) The object of an image is not a thing but a relation to something that is 'quasi-observed' and already known. In the language of *L'imagination* (1936), the image I have of a friend is a form of consciousness through which I relate to him or her. The object of an aesthetic experience (from *this* phenomenological perspective) is not the painting of Charles VIII as an entity made of wood and canvass and hanging in the Uffizi but an image appearing to the imaging consciousness, a synthetic whole perceived through the canvas. (Sartre 1940, 362) The image is a conflictual space because it is perceived as more than its medium and other than its subject. For Sartre, this internal differentiation that splits the image into an immaterial appearance and a subject proves the relational power of consciousness and its awareness of its freedom. The unreality of the image-subject proves that consciousness is able to take distance from the real.

The politics of images depends on the potentiality of consciousness to extend beyond what a code determines as 'readable'. The phenomenological method proves that the value of images rests in their ability to actualise a consciousness that is distinct from reading a text or perceiving a present object. The fact that in the image consciousness we take distance from the real proves that visuality generates its own type of thinking where images modulate our perception of the real. The fact that consciousness is free to associate the appearance and the subject of an image implies that the power of the visual is not bound to a code that can be read. To the contrary, the perception of images points to a type of thinking that is specific to visuality. Images do not just emulate other systems of signs but transforms our perception of the world.[17] Within the field of art history, Max Imdahl's iconic method reveals the ability of images to generate a visual level that actively intervenes into the interpretation of the texts that they refer to.

III. The iconic method: Imdahl

Fiedler anticipated the phenomenological model of image analysis by delineating pure visuality as the pertinent dimension of images. As Max Imdahl explains, Fiedler's formalism emerged in an artistic environment that concentrated on the 'deconceptualisation of the world' (*Entbegrifflichung der Welt*, Imdahl 1981, 13). As Jonathan Crary showed, the 19th century turned away from the disembodied model of vision based on the perspective that mapped out the geometrical space.[18] Visuality is embodied and the senses are individually studied as in the experimental aesthetics of Wundt and Fechner. Also, John Ruskin argued that painting presents the world as an optical arrangement of colours and Jules Laforgue insisted that painting was an optical medium where the impressionistic renderings of nature appear as 'coloured vibrations' for an undifferentiating eye.[19] While for Eduart Hanslick the object of music is the 'tonally moving forms' (*tönend bewegte Formen*), painting is for Fiedler a 'visually forming activity' (*sichtbares gestaltende Tätigkeit*, Imdahl 1981, 13).

Imdahl's *Ikonic* is a model of image analysis that integrated a phenomenological method in the art historical research.[20] In *Giotto, Arenafresken: Ikonografie, Ikonologie, Ikonic* (1981), Imdahl formulated his project of the iconic method as an alternative to Panofsky's iconology. Panofsky explored the analogies between images and their external sources and in this sense iconology is a symptomatology.[21] While

interpreting Giotto's frescos from the Scrovegni chapel, the iconologist relates these images to the texts of Pseudo-Bonaventura and emphasises the anthropocentric experience of religious emotionality. Yet the interpretation of the image as a paraphrase of a text homologates the visual to 'immanent meaning' of the theological content. Giotto's *Ascent to Calvary* would point out the presence of the religious affect in the sorrowful gaze of Mary and Jesus. What you see is what you can read but this does reveal the purely visual level through which the image modulates the theological texts.

On the other hand, the iconic method detects within the image a level that is immanent to its autonomous visual structure and that modulates the textual reference. This visual structure develops between the visual rhythm of the image and the Biblical theme. The question is the 'identity of visuality as a quality of expression that is not substitutable by anything else.'[22] (Imdahl, 1980, 13, my translation) Different images may refer to the same Biblical text. Considered from the perspective of their 'visuality' (*Bildlichkeit*), they refer intertextually to one another: the *Resurrection of Lazarus* from Padua is the model for the work in the Magdalena Chapel in Assisi. Their visual configurations point to one another yet, as images, they present us with a structure consisting of the relation between fore- and background, the distribution of colours and the choreography of the presented characters.

In this context, Imdahl distinguishes between three dimensions of the image: first, the textual reference (*Textreferenz*) refers to the Biblical texts that the scene depicts; second, the objective reference (*Gegenstandsreferenz*) refers to the correlates that are identifiable in the scene; third, the visuality (*Bildlichkeit*) refers to the attributes that constitute the image as such.[23] A pertinent image analysis has to reveal how the visuality mediates, within the space of the image, both the objective and the textual reference. (Imdahl 1980, 52) As long as the criteria that justify the image as a mode of signification constitute the object of inquiry, a theory of images has to reveal how these criteria modulate the objective and the textual references that the image designates. Merely identifying the objective references and subordinating them to the textual references turns the image into a symptom and its visuality in an adjacent mode of signification.

However, as we shall see, this is not the case. According to Imdahl, the image corresponds to two forms of seeing that coincide in the case of Giotto: a 'recognising seeing' (*das wiedererkennende Sehen*) and a 'visualising seeing' (*das sehende Sehen*). These two forms of seeing recuperate the phenomenological distinction between two types of consciousness. The 'recognising seeing' intends the textual referents that are external to the image, namely the Biblical texts. On the one hand, the image-object coincides here with the image-subject and the image is treated as a text that can read, i.e., it can be decoded if the viewer acknowledges its underlying code. The popular visual studies of the last decades treat the image in such a way and this method can indeed be called a 'calculated representation'. (Alloa 2005, 670) Precisely that which resists the binary logic of discourse - the density, the plasticity and the visuality of images - is subordinated to the logic of communicability. What you see is what an invisible code can transmit. On the other hand, the 'visualising seeing' intends the visual structure of the image itself. This requires two steps: firstly, one has to provisionally postpone all interests in the objective and textual references of the image. If the latter are bracketed, then the image presents us with the perspective and the scenic choreography, the arrangement and the gestures of the characters. The elements constitute the composition of the plane and belong to the visuality of the image. If the iconographic elements are abstracted, the result is the planar composition, a set of relations between directions, lines, colours and masses. Secondly, the question is how does this visualising type of seeing *modulate* the textual elements, namely the Biblical texts?

Take Giotto's *The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple* (Fig. 1). From the perspective of the recognising type of seeing, the viewer identifies a ciborium in the middle of the image. However, the ciborium is more than a figure that corresponds to an architectural object. From the perspective of the visualising type of seeing, the ciborium unites the figures as a group, namely Mary, Jesus and Simeon. Also, the *form* of the ciborium produces the perspectivist space and introduces density within the image. It provides the image with volume and it opens up the space while highlighting the central figure. Hence, the ciborium is a device that generates a specific visual meaning. As such, it is independent from the textual reference on which the image is based. If the ciborium were disregarded, the entire composition

would be a flat relief. The hypothesis is that images include elements that modulate the textual reference and that it is this modulation that justifies the visual presentation. One has to learn how to identify those elements within an image that actively resist the subordination of the image to the text. Leaning how to 'read' an image actually means ceasing to treat the image as a text. Other elements validate this hypothesis: first, the arches of the ciborium are optically related to the figures. The front left arch isolates Mary; the right one isolates Simeon and Jesus. (Imdahl 1980, 46) The double orientation of Jesus to Simeon and Mary also crystallises the temporality of the image: the posture of Jesus towards Simeon instantiates a synchronicity of 'still-and-no-longer' (*noch und nucht-mehr*) and the movement towards Mary a synchronicity of 'already-and-not-yet' (*schön und noch-nicht*).

This double temporality of 'no longer' and 'not yet' is a *visual* concentration of time (*Zeitverdichtung*) that the *written* Biblical texts do not accomplish.[24] Hence, the visuality of the image surpasses the textual and the objective references, the paraphrase of the Biblical text and the creation of a semblance. Their spatial disposition presents a 'scenic unity of meaning' (*szenische Sinneinheit*) that works through the textual reference. In the words of Lyotard, it is a 'figural' force that modulates the discourse and not just a figurative rendering that emulates the Biblical text. And indeed, this optical force is essentially disparate and resists a stable code: the place of the angel can suggest the inspiration of Simeon but it can also intensify the gesture of returning the child to the mother, an aspect that sets aside the inspiration of Simeon. Hence, the depiction of the angel is more than an iconographic element that can be read and that corresponds to the Biblical text. The angel saturates the image with a distinct *visual sense* that constitutes the image as such: it connects the gesture towards Mary, a gesture that also crystalizes the inspiration of Simeon by the angel. (Imdahl 1980, 56)

Hence, the iconic method (*Ikonik*) identifies a level of the image that surpasses both the visualising and the recognising seeing. It synthesises the practical experience of seeing into a totality of visual meaning. Following this method, the unity of a composition like *The Kiss of Judas* (Fig. 2) becomes manifest in a visual signifier that independent of the recognising type of seeing. The fresco presents a group of figures yet also includes a slant that appears if the viewer follows the direction of the club on

the left side of the image, further follows the heads of Jesus and Judas and ends in the pointing gesture of the Pharisee on the right. This slant that extends itself across the image relates the different figures to each other and marks the group as a whole. It can only be seen if the gaze follows this course. However, this slant is neither an objective nor a textual referent and it has no moment inscribed in the temporality of the story. The slant is neither an object, nor an event described in the Biblical text. It is visible but it is not a thing and it happens nowhere. In the language of Husserl, the slant belongs to the image-object and it provides the image with a visual meaning that is irreducible to the Biblical event. Its significance is independent of similarity or make-belief and belongs to the potentiality of the optical force that gives scenic meaning to the picture.

The slant modulates the Biblical texts because it brings together, through *autonomous visual means,* the supremacy of Jesus on the background of his passivity and, vice versa, his subordination on the horizon of his supremacy. (Imdahl 1980, 94-95) In order to comprehend the immense value of this phenomenological approach, imagine a different pictorial composition. If the pointing gesture of the Pharisee had not connected the group to the club, then the entire composition would have collapsed. Hence, the slant unites two layers of significance: the passivity of Jesus in the arms of Judas *and* the Pharisee pointing to him as to the one that the soldiers actively look for. The gesture increases the intensity of the movement from right to left, just as the same diagonal increases the intensity of the gaze between Jesus and Judas.

The image as a visual construct includes a dimension that escapes the emulation of the visual to the textual. As the correlate of a 'visualising seeing', the image actualises what semioticians call an 'aspectualisation', i.e., a singular temporal and spatial distribution of figures in the synchronicity of the plastic surface. Meaning in visuality emerges as the outcome of spatial and temporal arrangements that constitute an image-object, an immaterial appearance that is something more than the material, the objective or the textual referent. The value of an artistic image consists in the ability to generate a visual structure that implements an optical force onto an event that can also narrated. Giotto's frescos confront us with a level of visual immediacy that forces the 'reading' mind to follow the 'seeing' eye. What you see is the subordination of the

Biblical text to tensions and velocities of forms that modulate and not just emulate the holy story.

IV. Conclusion

From the perspective of the picture theory, the premises of the phenomenological approach can become the object of a harsh criticism. Does not the initial bracketing of the iconographic content transform the image into an empty abstraction? Does not this derealisation of the image diminish the critical impact that the visual arts can exercise on the social and cultural medium from which they emerge? Does not the dematerialisation of the image overlook the significance of the medium? It seems that the phenomenological approach fails to do justice to the material, technological and conceptual aspects of certain artistic styles. Take, for instance, the generative art where different technological systems determine the image as much as the intuition of the artist. Or even the matter-oriented art of *arte povera* where the relation of the visual to the material is too determinative for the latter to be bracketed. In this sense, it can be said that the picture theory surpasses the phenomenological because, instead of relying on distinctions between types of consciousness and visuality, it links the visual to other forms of signification.

And yet, while it lacks a systematic stance towards the phenomenological approach, the picture theory indirectly imported some of its fundamental intuitions, like the distinction between a (material) picture and an (immaterial) image or even the fundamental intuition of the pictorial turn that images mediate in a different way the shared external reality. As it has been shown, this communicative basis of the pictorial turn has been thoroughly described in the phenomenological analysis where the relationality between image-subject and image-object is intrinsic to the image-consciousness. The fundamental reason why images communicate is the structure of the type of consciousness to which they pertain.

The dematerialisation of the image has a methodological value in the phenomenological approach. This bracketing is meant to distinguish the phenomenal appearance as the primary layer in the formation of a visual significance that cannot be equated with the perception of an object in the flesh or with reading a text. In order to determine the specificity of a medium and its broader effects, its perception must

not be subordinated to similar media and their identifiable effects. If you identify a figure in a chart or in an image, a pertinent analysis has to evince what are the different effects of the figure in different contexts, as a figurative appearance or as a code. Hence, the advantage of the phenomenological approach is that it accounts for two issues: firstly, how the intuition of pictures essentially differs from other forms of intuition; secondly, that this difference justifies the significance of the visual because pictures do not just relate to other modes of representation but primarily constitute their own image-object that is autonomous from language.

In this sense, the relation between image and text in the analysis of images is not that of emulating the two. What you see is not what you can also read according to a system of conventions. To the contrary, Imdahl's iconic method starts from the idea of determining how the pure visual force of an image *resists* and *modulates* the textual reference. Visual signification does not consist in an image emulates a text but in an image that works through a text and inflects in it specifically visual tensions that are not present in the text. Establishing differences between the visual and the discursive is hardly an original intuition: distinctions have influenced various modern aesthetic systems.[25] However, through the description of the image-object and of the 'visualising seeing', the phenomenological method determined the potentiality of the visual to transform the presentation of the world through images. There is an iconographic content in Giotto's frescos, yet there is also the slat and the density of the ciborium that resist the reduction of the image to the text. Hence, understanding this infinite potential of the visual provides a framework for the conception of the image as a field of forces with its own directions and tensions. It is in this sense that the phenomenological model is a significant contribution to the project of the picture theory.

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Fig. 1: Giotto - *The Presentation of Jesus in the Temple* (1304-1306)

Fig. 2: Giotto - *Kiss of Judas* (1304-1306)

[1] In *Bilder über Bilder. Bilder ohne Bilder. Eine neue Theorie der Bildlichkeit* (2011), Christoph Asmuth has showed how the perception of visual images depends on cognitive (as opposed to sensual) distinction. See Asmuth 2011, 13.

[2] The continental tradition developed consistently the phenomenological and hermeneutical approach. A key figure here is Gottfried Boehm and his work on the 'iconic difference' as the 'visual contrast' between an emerging outline and a background. Boehm emphasises the priority of the visual as mode of signification in comparison to the discursive (since we exchange images before we talk)

[2] The continental tradition developed consistently the phenomenological and hermeneutical approach. A key figure here is Gottfried Boehm and his work on the 'iconic difference' as the 'visual contrast' between an emerging outline and a background. Boehm emphasises the priority of the visual as mode of signification in comparison to the discursive (since we exchange images before we talk)

and the synaesthetic effect of images as entities that confront the viewer with 'the tension between the eye, the hand and the mouth' (*la tension entre l'oeil, la main et la bouche*, in Alloa, ed., 2010, 39, my translation). See Boehm, Gottfried, *Ce qui se montre. De la difference iconique* in Alloa, ed., 2010, 27-49 and *Was ist ein Bild?* (1995).

[3] See also Mitchell's reading of Goodman from *Iconology* (1986), 50-67. Norman Bryson, in *Vision and Painting: The Logic of the Gaze* (1983), also defended a position similar to Goodman, namely that visual presentation conforms to a system of conventions. This emulation of the visual to the linguistic has a long tradition. In *Art and Illusion* (1960), Gombrich discussed the status of recognition and resemblance as a function of images. In the analytical tradition, Robert Hopkins and John Hyman are significant researchers in the line of Goodman. See, amongst other titles, Robert Hopkins' *Picture, Image and Experience: A Philosophical Inquiry* (1998) and John Hyman's *Pictorial Art and Visual Experience* (2000). Here too, visual experience is accounted for in terms of the identification of an image's correlate based on a comparison to previous perceptive experiences. While clearly distinguishing the visual as a specific type of signification, the communicative function of images still prevails.

[4] These theories recuperate an argument that Roman Jakobson formulated in the 1920's. In *On Realism in Art* (1921), Jakobson argued that just the viewer first acquires the language of painting just like learning a language, i.e. the conventions according to which the painting works. See Jakobson 1987, 21. See also John Hyman's critical discussion of Goodman in *The Objective Eye: Colour, Form, and Reality in the Theory of Art* (2006).

[5] See the pertinent analysis of Emmanuel Alloa, *Changer du sens. Quelques effets du 'tournant iconique'* (2010).

[6] Gottfried Boehm collected and edited Fiedler's writings in *Schriften zur Kunst*, I, II (1991). The literature dedicated to Fiedler often refers to these two essays: *Über den Ursprung der künstlerischen Tätigkeit* (1887) and *Über die Beurteilung von Werken der Bildenden Kunst* (1876). Philippe Junod's *Transparance et opacité* (1976) is still the most elaborate study on Fiedler. See also Danièle Cohn's epilogue to the French translation of the *Über Ursprung der künstlerischen Tätigkeit*, published in 2008 (originally published in 2003).

[7] See Wiesing 1997, 163.

[8] Lambert Wiesing argues that Fiedler's notion of 'pure visuality' has to be understood as a 'self-contained form of being'. (Wiesing 1997, 163)

[9] Ernst Cassirer and Nelson Goodman too, conceived art as a symbolic system adjacent to science and language. For Cassirer, art is a symbolic form that mediates the world by endowing it with a visual sense. In the myth there is a tension between the form and the content because, while the content is absorbed into the image, it also attempts to free itself from its sensuous aspect. Contrastingly, the artistic formation of the world liberates itself from the tensions of the myth. The viewer does not use the image to look to the religious figure *through it* but perceives it as an autonomous symbolic form. (Cassirer 2003, 94) For Goodman art, language and science are versions of the world that can only be verified within their own symbolic frame. In his *Languages of Art* (1968), like Fiedler, he argues that art shapes a world independent of resemblance with the exterior reality.

[10] In *The Manifold of Perception* (1972), Podro traces this metaphor back to Hegel's *Philosophy of Mind* where it is used in the context of developing philosophical systems. The organic metaphors of growth are in fact common in the 19th century German philosophy, as in Goethe or Herder. In fact, Fiedler's background is neo-Kantian because emphasises the formatting qualities of the mental faculties. Like von Humboldt, he sees the development of the mind as depending on the development of language. Art too, like the mind, develops from disorder to order, from the formless to the formed. On the problems involved in the analogy of visual arts and language, see Podro 1972, 114-120.

[11] Fiedler writes: 'Creation of form must be imagined as a thought process in which the architectural forms themselves are the content.' (in Mallgrave 1994, 130)

[12] Husserl's phenomenology of the image is developed in *Phantasie, Bildbewusstsein, Erinnerung (1898-1925*). There also references to the subject in *Ideen* and in *Ding und Raum*. Deeply indebted to Husserl, Sartre analysed the consciousness pertaining to images in *L'imagination* (1936), especially in the last chapter, dedicated to Husserl, and in *L'imaginaire* (1940). On Husserl's image consciousness and the visual arts see Nicolas de Warren, *Tamino's Eyes, Pamina's Gaze: Husserl's Phenomenology of Image-Consciousness* (2010).

[13] The German *Bild* can refer both to the material carrier and to the immaterial appearance. Husserl's distinction between image-object and image-subject clarifies this semantic ambivalence. Lambert Wiesing argues that this 'derealisation' of the image is a means of abstracting the pure visuality. See Wiesing 1997, 227. Nicolas de Warren also points out that this 'indifference or suspicion

of the particular cultural context of the image' has a methodological function meant to describe the way in which images are given to consciousness in distinction from objects present in the flesh. See de Warren 2010, 314.

[14] Husserl writes: 'The photograph image object (not the photographed object) truly does not exist. "Truly" - that does not signify: [not] existing *outside* my consciousness; on the contrary, it signifies not existing at all, not even in my consciousness. What does really exist is the determinate distribution of colours on the paper and likewise a corresponding complex of sensations that I experience in contemplating the photograph. In the same way, the phantasy image truly does not exist at all, but there does exist in the experience of the phantasy a complex of sensuous phantasy contents corresponding to the image.' (Husserl 2005, 119) [*Das photographische Bildobjekt (nicht der photographierte Gegenstand) existiert wahrhaft nicht. Wahrhaft, das besagt nicht:* außer *meinem Bewußtsein, sondern überhaupt nicht, auch nicht* in *ihm. Was wirklich existiert, das ist die bestimmte Farbenverteilung auf dem Papier und desgleichen eine entsprechende Komplexion von Empfindungen, die ich, die Photographie betrachtend, erlebe. Ebenso existiert eine ihm entsprechende Komplexion von Sinnlichen Phantasieinhalten im Erlebnis der Phantasievorstellung.* Husserl 1980, 110]

[15] See de Warren 2010, 326.

[16] In chapter 3, section 15-16, Husserl distinguishes between *immanent* and *symbolic* images. In the immanent imaging, the image-object has an internal relation to the image-subject, like a reproduction of a painting in a catalogue that has an internal and immanent relation to the original painting. In symbolic imagining, there is no internal relation between the image-object and the image-subject. The visual appearance signals its referent, like in the case of hieroglyphs that are signs with no internal relation to that which they presentify (or render present).

[17] See Bredekamp's *Darwins Korallen. Die frühen Evolutionsdiagramme und die Transition der Naturgeschichte* (2005).

[18] See Jonathan Crary's *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (1990). For a critical discussion of this book, see Mitchell 1994, 19-20.

[19] On the history of vision in correlation to other senses see Martin Jay's *Downcast Eyes* (1994), especially chapter 3, *The Crisis of the Ancient Scopic Regime: From the Impressionists to Bergson.*

[20] For an integration of Imdahl's work in the broader German science of the image (*Bildwissenschaft*) see Matthew Rampley's essay *Bildwissenschaft: Theories of the Image in German-Language Scholarship* in M. Rampley, T. Lenain, H. Locher, A. Pinotti, C. Schoell-Glass, K. Zijlmans, eds., 2012, 119-134.

[21] For a similar conception of the pictorial turn, see Alloa 2010, 676.

[22] *...die Frage nach der Identität von Bildlichkeit als einer durch nichts anderes zu ersetzenden Ausdrucksqualität.*

[23] *Bildlichkeit* can be rendered as 'visuality' even though there is no English word that can perfectly translate its meaning. An alternative would be the 'image-like quality' or the 'image-like criteria'.

[24] Also, the image differentiates between two groups. On the one hand, there is the main scene consisting of the relation between Mary, Jesus and Simeon. On the other hand, there are scenic distinct moments, like the relation between the angel and Simeon and the relation between the gestures of Hannah and Jesus. According to the textual reference, the angel is the inspiration of Simeon and the gesture of Hannah is a concerned sign towards Jesus that intensifies the gesture of Mary.

[25] After all, Kant, Herder, Hegel, Schopenhauer had already discerned aesthetic experiences based on a typology of arts. In the aftermath of Kant and Hegel, Theodor Fr. Vischer and Robert Zimmermann developed two massive projects of establishing a science of art. Vischer's *Aesthetik oder Wissenschaft des Schönen,* a six volume majestic work completed in 1857, was influenced by Hegel's dialectical method. Zimmermann's *Aesthetik*, consisting of two volumes that appeared in 1858 and 1865, can be considered as its counterpart because it designed a system of aesthetics based on the Herbartian formalism.